

The Kouprey

By Patrick McGeown

For many years people have reported sightings of the grey Cambodian ox: the kouprey. Expeditions have been set up. Rewards for its capture have been offered. It has been seen in Laos, Vietnam, and on the Thai-Cambodian border. But the elusive kouprey, like the Loch Ness monster, evades the camera.

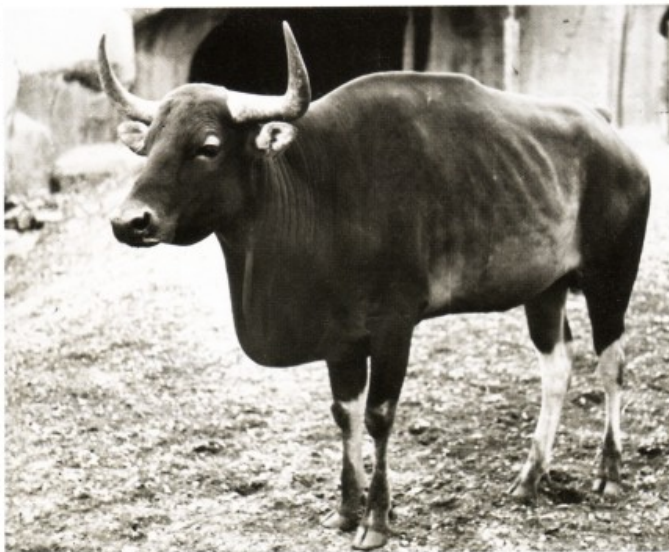
Sightings have been recorded in 1949 at Nakhon Ratchasima, in 1975 in Si Sa Ket, in 1982 in the Doung Rak Ranges, in 1991 in Ubon Ratchathani near the Laotian border, and at other times elsewhere. But searches have failed to locate the animal. The Wildlife Fund of Thailand has incorporated the kouprey into their logo, and in 1964 Prince Norodom Sihanouk declared it Cambodia's national animal. It seems that at one stage in history the animal must have been highly revered. Statues of the kouprey kneeling have been found throughout the Khmer empire. Carvings of the animal also decorate the walls of Angkor Wat temples, and the animal also features in pre-historic cave paintings.

I became interested in this animal while putting together some posters on protected animals. The project was sponsored by Volvo. But do you think I could find a picture of a kouprey? Not one. My frustration led me to seek public help. I wrote to the Post Bag section of the *Bangkok Post*. One reader obliged with a picture of a man looking for a kouprey. Another told me to forget it. And searching for a photograph seemed as difficult as finding the animal itself. Then Mr Roy Hudson from Chiang Mai suggested I try the Vincennes Zoo in Paris where a kouprey was supposedly held in 1937.

I got my office in Paris on the archive hunt, and in a few weeks I received pictures and observations of the kouprey. When I looked at the animal's photograph, I did a double take. I had expected to see a majestic fighting bull, but instead I was looking at a very young, undeveloped ox. Never mind; it was a kouprey and possibly one of only a few remaining photo-

graphs of the animal in the world. And what was more important: I had unearthed some valuable information about the animal. That information I will share in the hope that it may assist some expeditions, or help with recognition if one of the species stumbles into your backyard.

The animal you see was caught in Tchep in Northern Cambodia in 1936. At that time Professor Achille Urbain, the Director of the Vincennes Zoo in Paris, was visiting Dr Sauvel, a veterinarian in Northern Cambodia, when he witnessed a massacre of koupreys. He recognised them as a new species and dedicated the animal to Dr Sauvel. They chose one as a "perfect specimen", and sent it to Paris. They believed the animal probably had been domesticated during the period of Khmer culture (11th to 16th century), but had returned to the wild after the fall of that civilisation. The following facts have been obtained from archives in the Vincennes Zoo in Paris. These facts have



The kouprey (*Bos bilbos souveli urbain*) at three and a half years old.

been translated from French archives, and it is believed that this is the first time they have been published outside France.

A peculiarity of the male kouprey is the curious fibres just behind the tips of the horns. These frayed filaments are quite normal in all species, but are eliminated when the animals rub their horns into the soil. But the kouprey, with its complicated curvature of the horns, is unable to dig the points into the soil and this results in a permanent crown of fibres.

The habitat of the kouprey is sparse savannah, dotted with thickets and undergrowth that offer shade and protection. There is a degree of association between the kouprey and the banteng, and they have been seen grazing and moving about together.

In 1957, it was estimated that the kouprey population was between 650 and 850 heads, and it was feared then that Cambodia's political upheavals would contribute even further to its reduction.

According to Dr Sauvel, a herd generally comprises a bull with six to seven cows, and a few young animals. An old cow plays the role of guide, with one or more males following behind. At the beginning of June, after mating, the herds divide into two groups, the female in one, and the young single male in another. As with all bovines, the old bulls tend to live in seclusion. Mating takes place in April and May, and the gestation period is nine months, with the calves being born in December, January, and, sometimes, February. The females, with their calves, isolate themselves for about one month, and then rejoin the herd with their calves, which they suckle for six months. It was also noted that koupreys do not frequent soiled ground, and they are more timid than the gaur and banteng.

Now, if you are on a kouprey hunt and see one of these animals, double check before telling the world you have found one. Females

are a quarter smaller and lighter than the males. A hump extends from the withers to the middle of the back. The body is slender, the legs long, the dewlap very well developed from the chin to the mid-front chest, and, in old bulls, trails to the ground. The lower parts of the legs are whitish (called socks). The horns are long, and resemble those of the wild yak: growing sideways and backwards, then upwards and forwards with the tips finally curving inwards. The horns have an oval-shaped cross-section at the base, and in the old animals are circled with rolls of fat. The maximum length of the horns is 80 cms in the male, and 40 cms in the female.

In 1957, it was estimated that the kouprey population was between 650 and 850 heads, and it was feared then that Cambodia's political upheavals would contribute even further to its reduction. I'd say that has been the case, and that this once majestic animal may soon join the ranks of other animals that have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Today, the kouprey is classified as a 'reserved species' — meaning extremely rare and endangered — no hunting, capturing, exporting, or keeping in captivity. ■

Patrick McGeown works in advertising, teaches, and enjoys anything humorous and different.



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